THREATENED & ENDANGERED SPECIES

Eggert's Sunflower

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Eggert's sunflower (*Helianthus eggertii)* is a tall perennial species that produces distinctive bluish-green foliage accented by showy yellow flowers during late summer and early fall. A strikingly attractive species, the plant reveals its true glory from its ability to colonize large areas, making it one of the most spectacular sunflowers in North America.

Named in honor of Heinrich Karl Daniel Eggert, a German born plant enthusiast, the species was first brought to the attention of botanists from specimens collected near White Bluff in Dickson County, Tennessee, in 1897. Since the species was first observed nearly 105 years ago, it has been observed elsewhere in Tennessee, as well as in adjacent areas of Kentucky and northern Alabama. Doctor Robert Kral has the distinction of being the first to discover Eggert's sunflower in Alabama, finding it during the fall of 1981 within an open hardwood forest in western Blount County. Another 20 years would pass before the species would once again be detected, another in Blount County and most recently, an exceptionally vigorous occurrence in Franklin County.

During pre-settlement times, conditions favorable for *Helianthus eggertii* were relatively widespread across the region but have been greatly reduced to a mere fraction of their original extent, prompting the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to federally classify the species as threatened on May 22, 1997. While locally abundant in portions of its range, the majority of populations are small and vulnerable to extirpation.

Eggert's sunflower is believed to be an early successional species that colonizes shallow soils of open woodlands and barrens. It is intolerant of shade and will eventually disappear in response to natural succession and the lack of soil disturbance. In fact, some soil disturbance is essential to stimulate germination and maintain proper growing conditions. Drought and fire were the historical ecological processes that maintained the complex of grassy openings, barrens, and open woodlands in which the sunflower prefers. These open habitats were embedded in a matrix of a mixed hardwood forest essentially comprised of various oak and hickory, accented with a scattering of pine and eastern red cedar. However, with the removal of fire from the landscape, these species have gradually invaded and displaced the sunflower throughout much of its current range. Although fire suppression is partially responsible for the rapid disappearance of the species, habitat fragmentation as a result of unplanned development and highway construction are also to blame.

Recovery strategies developed for Eggert's sunflower by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service calls for the enhancement and maintenance of populations through habitat protection, management, and restoration. To remove the species from the endangered species list, it is important to secure viable populations across its range. This can be accomplished through cooperative efforts among private landowners, government agencies, and conservation groups.

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